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FWS denies Channel Island foxes of critical habitat

Natalie M. Henry, *Land Letter* Northwest Reporter

PORTLAND, Ore. -- Four subspecies of endangered fox native to California's Channel Islands do not need critical habitat, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The service decided that since the fox uses all the habitat on the islands for foraging and breeding, no specific areas are uniquely important and thus none can be singled out as being critical for their survival or recovery. Furthermore, the service maintains that none of the habitats are threatened because almost all of the land is managed by the National Park Service, the Nature Conservancy and the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy.

FWS spokesman Mike McCrary said critical habitat, by definition in the Endangered Species Act, only allows the Interior secretary to designate a species' entire habitat area as critical in special cases. In addition, ESA defines critical habitat as an area requiring special management, and since the Island foxes' habitat is already being managed by federal and nonprofit organizations, it is already receiving special management.

Another factor in the service's decision was the threats to the fox, which include predation, disease and an influx of non-native animals but not habitat destruction, according to McCrary. "If it was because of habitat destruction or alteration or loss of habitat, then we would have made a different decision," he said.

The Santa Rosa Island fox is the island's largest native mammal. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.

Environmentalists are appalled by the decision not to designate any habitat as critical for the fox. Kieran Suckling, executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity, said the service's reasoning is outlandish and illegal. The center, which sued FWS several years ago to get the service to consider designating critical habitat for the species, intends to head to court again, he said.

Suckling denounced the service's argument that since the foxes use the entire island, none of it is critical. "That's utter nonsense. Any 10th grader would say, 'Oh, the entire island is what's essential. That's its habitat, its habitat is the island,'" Suckling said.

"If you followed [the service's] logic, no plants would ever get critical habitat again because by definition a plant lives in [the] entire area [where it is found.] It doesn't live anywhere else." Suckling said, adding that he suspects FWS is using this reasoning to set a precedent for not designating critical habitat for other species as well.

The service does have reason to avoid designating critical habitat, evident in every decision on critical habitat and each news release sent out in recent years under the Bush administration detailing the service's position that critical habitat provides little additional protection for most listed species and eats up the agency's scarce resources. Environmentalists counter that FWS data indicates species with critical habitat are twice as likely to be recovering.

The Santa Cruz Island fox, San Miguel Island fox, Santa Rosa Island fox and Santa Catalina Island fox live on the four islands that make up the Channel Islands off the coast of Southern California. Island foxes are gray, white, black and cinnamon and are one of the world's smallest canid species, no larger than a house cat.